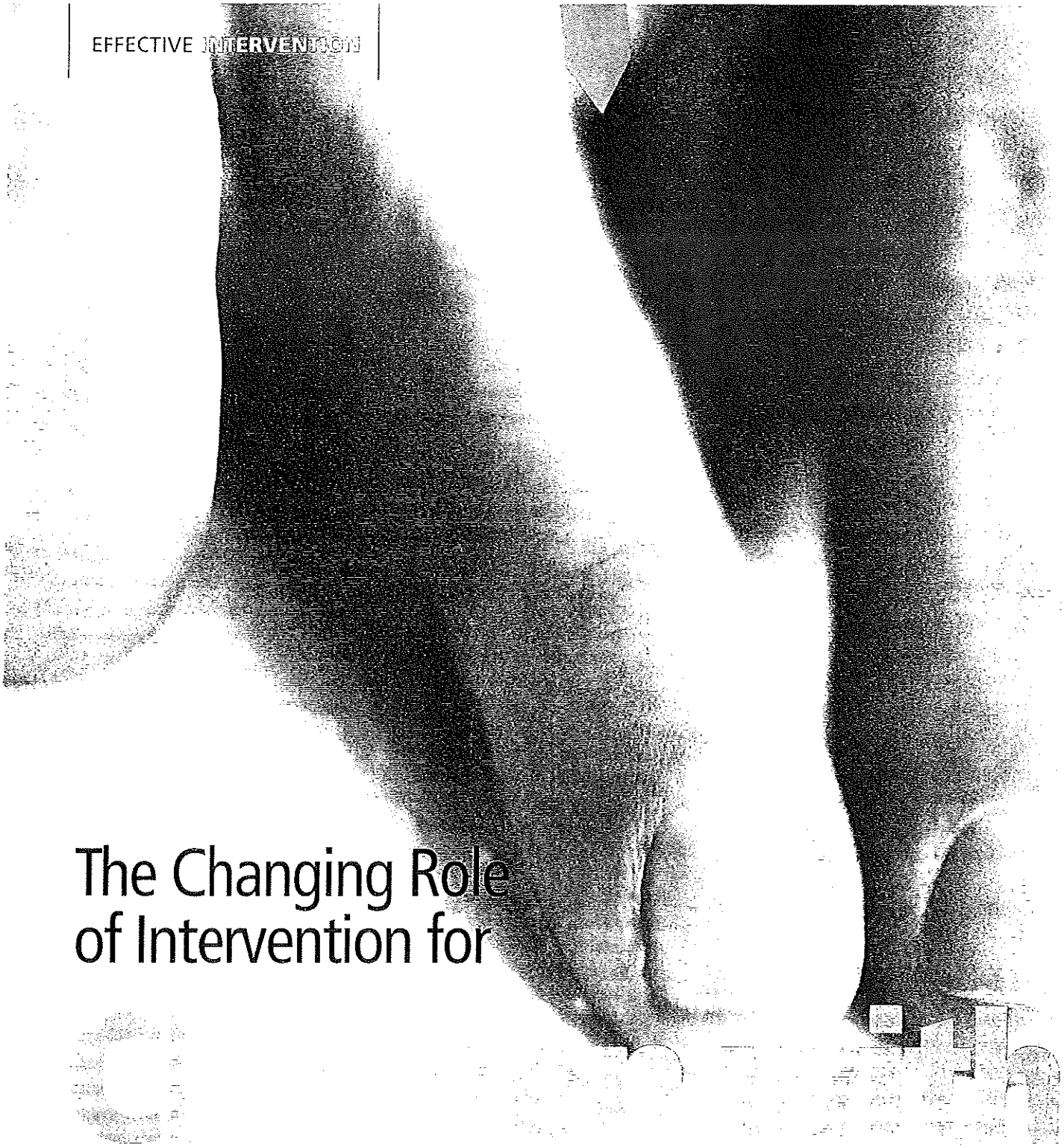

The Changing Role of Intervention for Disabilities

Thomas Hehir

Appropriate intervention can reduce the impact of disability and enhance access to quality education.

The purpose of intervention for children with disabilities should be to provide them with the assistance they need to participate in regular classrooms and activities. The author, an authority on special education, presents some important points for principals to consider when making intervention decisions.

The decisions that parents and school personnel make at IEP meetings can and should have long-term consequences for children with disabilities, their families, and the educators who serve them. Basically, these decisions involve two interrelated areas, interventions and access, and should have as their goal minimizing the impact of disability and maximizing opportunities to participate in regular classroom instruction (Ferguson and Asch 1989).

In this context, I define interventions as services that are designed to respond to needs that arise out of disability. However, it is important to acknowledge that, for most students, interventions do not eliminate the impacts of disability, but simply lessen them (Hocutt 1996).

Teaching a blind child to read Braille, providing intensive specialized help to a dyslexic student to help him or her break the phonetic code, assisting a child with articulation problems to speak more clearly, assisting children with autism through structured behavioral therapies, or even teaching a student how to transfer from a wheelchair to a classroom chair are a few examples of interventions that can greatly reduce the impact of disability.

However, it is also important to note that interventions also can exacerbate the impact of disability. For instance, some interventions may lead to inappropriate segregation of disabled students or result in the child being "pulled out" of important academic classes. Other interventions may inadvertently increase children's feelings of difference and inferiority by inordinately focusing on their disability.

Harlyn Rousso, an adult with physical disabilities, describes her intervention experience:

"My disability, with my different walk and talk and my involuntary movements, having been with me all my life, was part of me, part of my identity. With these disability features, I felt whole. My mother's attempt to change my walk, strange as it may seem, felt like an assault on myself, an incomplete acceptance of me, an attempt to make me over. I fought back because I wanted to be accepted as I was" (Rousso 1984).

Intervention decisions for disabilities are serious matters and educators must weigh important considerations when making them. Not only should we be concerned about the potential efficacy of certain interventions; we also need to be concerned about trade-offs and children's perceptions of the interventions.

By contrast, access decisions involve providing children with disabilities opportunities to participate in regular classrooms and activities. In this regard, No Child Left Behind is bringing unprecedented attention to the need for these children to receive the accommodations, supports, and modifications they require to access the general education curriculum.

There are some important points for principals and other educators to consider in making access and intervention decisions.

Integration into general education environments and promoting high standards should be a primary focus. If our goal is to minimize the impact of disability and increase opportunities for children to participate, the importance of classroom integration is obvious. However, even though many interventions can be provided within the classroom, there are times where this goal cannot be achieved optimally in a general education environment.

Removal should occur only if important learning goals cannot be achieved in the general education environment. Though research shows relatively strong support for inclusion, it does not support the proposition that all children with disabilities should be educated at all times in general education classrooms (Hocutt 1996; Torgesen 2000). Because the population of children with disabilities is large and diverse, a successful practice for one group may not be appropriate for another, and there may be justifiable reasons for removal.

Removal should not occur simply because general educators refuse to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities. As a special education teacher, I learned and practiced the art of negotiation in order to integrate "my kids" into general education classrooms. There were some teachers who were a godsend for the students I served, while there were others I avoided. Looking back, I have mixed feelings about my behavior. On the one hand, I was successful in attaining important educational experiences for

students with disabilities. On the other hand, I was condoning discrimination that was—and is—illegal and immoral.

Students with disabilities have the right to the accommodations, modifications, and supports they need to be successful in general education classrooms, and no teacher or administrator should be allowed to abridge that right. Although the law is clear, I frequently hear from parents and teachers that children with disabilities are not allowed in general education classes because they cannot read on grade level or because they need support in meeting classroom behavioral requirements. The "tolerance level" for this discriminatory behavior, in my view, is way too high.

Though it may be difficult for school principals to force integration on a recalcitrant teacher, failure to do so will keep the system in place and result in lost opportunities for students. From its inception, the IDEA has been about changing how schools serve students with disabilities. Difficult as it may be, we must continue to push for full access for all students.

Differential diagnosis is important. Although it conjures up the return of the discredited "medical model" of disability, differential diagnosis is necessary in order to have a clear understanding of the nature of a child's disability. Knowing *why* a child is having difficulty is central to good decision-making. For instance, a third grader may not be reading well for a variety of reasons, including mental retardation, dyslexia, a hearing impairment, or attention difficulties.

The child with mental retardation, though behind his peers, may be reading at his expectancy level, whereas the child with attention problems may need targeted accommodations or carefully prescribed medication. The student with dyslexia may need a highly structured reading intervention, while the child with a hearing impairment simply may need a new hearing aid.

Consider family capabilities and desires. Parents are children's first teachers and making good educational decisions should take into account their capabilities and desires. Though many believe that learning independent living skills is important for children, particularly those with mental retardation, skills like learning to cook would be a waste of precious instructional time for a boy whose family has sought to minimize the impact of his disability by already teaching him these skills.

> "...Students can give educators important insights about the impact of their disability and the most effective ways in which they learn."

Educators should work with families in schools' efforts to minimize the impact of disability. I recently had a discussion with a deaf woman who underscored the benefits of this approach. A lawyer who was born deaf to deaf parents, she was currently serving a significant administrative role in higher education and had clearly attained high levels of language and literacy. She credited her parents for her ability to overcome deafness. They were voracious readers, their home was full of books and magazines, and from the time she and her deaf sister were young, they emphasized language and literacy.

Involve students with disabilities in educational decisions where appropriate. Just as parents are critical in achieving better results, students can give educators important insights about the impact of their disability and the most effective ways in which they learn. It is also important for students with disabilities, particularly as they move into adolescence and begin to take appropriate responsibility for their education, to understand both the nature and impact of their disability. They need to integrate their disability into their self-image in a way that is natural and positive (Rousso 1984).

Encourage students with disabilities to develop and use skills and modes of expression that are most effective and efficient for them. School personnel and parents often have a strong preference to have students with disabilities perform school tasks in the same way as non-disabled children. Examples of this would be having children with very poor vision read print, as opposed to learning Braille, even if reading is very difficult for them, or requiring a severely dyslexic child to read rather than provide taped books for some subjects.

Social integration is important. In a presentation on inclusion, I was once asked whether I felt it was appropriate for schools to help children with disabilities make friends. I answered that I did. Fostering good citizenship has long been recognized as an important role of schools, and the development of positive social relationships among students is an obvious means toward that end. This may take on even more importance for schools, given that friendships for many students with disabilities may not develop as naturally as they do for other children. To help them, innovative educators have developed programs like "Circle of Friends," which provide systematic approaches for the development of social relationships between significantly disabled and non-disabled students.

There are also other important reasons, beyond the obvious joys of friendship, why the development of social relationships is important. An important one is that students with significant disabilities need to begin to develop supports within their community that can help them long after they leave school.

The decisions educators and parents make concerning interventions and access need to go hand in hand. Appropriate interventions can greatly enhance access to quality education for children with disabilities. However, these decisions are often complicated and involve thoughtful consideration of the dual goal of minimizing the impact of disability while maximizing the opportunities for children with disabilities to participate. ◻

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www.ideapractices.org

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